



## Middle East and female representation: Fiction versus Fact

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# Inter sections

# Middle East and female representation: Fiction versus fact

**Hamideh Javadi Bejandi**

Supervised by: Dr. Murat Akser,  
Dr. Victoria McCollum & Dr. Lisa Fitzpatrick

Naturally, the personal journey of displaced artists, and their place of origin, affects the way they are inspired and the work they create. However, as noted by Naficy (2001) these journeys are not merely physical but profoundly philosophical and psychological and above all are journeys of identities, in which old identities are shed new ones are shaped. As a result, a consistent state of tension between their original self and the self in present location is evident.

The spectrum of psychological, cultural, traditional, physical and ideological factors that influence artists' creativity, is bound by their identity. This paper will explore and describe different forms of represented identity in video arts in terms of how artists' identity constitutes the audio-visual language and forms a subjective lens. This research aims to explore, through theory and practice, a proper audio-visual and presenting style which is expressive of the issues and concepts discussed above by including aesthetic, creative and innovative dimension. First of all, it needs no re-emphasis that this paper focuses exclusively on the relationship between content, form and technique in distinguished videos artworks dealing with such affinity. Furthermore, while these video samples are conceptually similar in content and audio-visual style, they might be different in their production structure and presentation attributes.

*Keywords: screen production, video installation, audio visual, cultural identity*

## 1. Introduction

Middle East is an ancient region, associated with the rich history of legends, myths and storytelling tradition. Shahrzad (Scheherazade) is the most renowned transnational female storyteller associated with this ancient zone. She is the narrator of impressive stories in *The Thousand and One Nights* to the monarch. Her storytelling art was a powerful influence that enchanted the king, spared her life, and brought her freedom. Her narration strategy involves temporality; framing each narrative into another one in different episodes (sometimes open ended), to establish suspension.

Veiled female storytellers are familiar with the nature of a blank screen, as it reminds them of their predestination and boundaries. It implies an absent presence and several untold stories: a transgressed territory. Just the same as 'Shahrzad the storyteller', who was forced to reveal her art in a private space, veiled women's voices have been limited to indoor spaces. Until recently, veiled women have been anonymous authors of unpublished tales. Conventionally, storytelling is considered as a traditional ancient legacy of Iranian grandmothers. It could be regarded as an expressive form of speech or an adaption of their life story. An irenic, safe and domestic style of art and craft, audienced by their

children or neighbouring women. It was amusing, powerful and effective in terms of educating the next generation. Today, many of contemporary exiled, female filmmakers and activists follow the same ambition and tradition in narrating and framing their stories. Their artistic practice is engaged with questions concerning ideology and paradoxes. Accordingly, the condition of living and working in between hybrid cultures requires a new form of audio-visual expression: an appropriate medium and style for addressing and posing questions that illustrates their concerns and restrictions.

This paper outlines the investigation I am conducting as a part of my practice-based PHD research at Ulster University. My enquiry seeks to highlight the relationship between conceptual framework and artistic form, reflected in the video productions of Iranian female artists.

## **2. The concept of veiling and voices through the veil**

Here, my analysis includes Shirin Neshat's expressive power in forming an original and independent audio-visual style. Directors' protests and lived experiences in association with specific ideologies are some of the contributing factors in forming such unique audio-visual language. Similarly, the mentioned factors could fall within the scope of artist's creativity.

Stuart Hall (1994) argues that 'cultural identity' is a collective and evolving form that unceasingly is shaped by shared lived experience. According to Hall (1994); a becoming procedure lies at the core of identity which is revealed by representation. Likewise, it is through historic and narrative roots that material and symbolic effects become associated with tradition and memory. Hamid Naficy's (2001) concept of 'accented style' offers a practical concept for positioning exiled Iranian female artists amongst the existing cinematic debates. For Naficy, 'accented,' films are characterised by independent movies; created in artisanal mode of production by migrant and displaced filmmakers or those who have experienced exile and diaspora. Similarly, he suggests that understanding the unique language of dislocated filmmakers is deeply rooted in their bicultural identity and lived experience which requires familiarisation with the structure of such accent. In his comprehensive infrastructure, he offers the shared and prevailing components; including narrative, visuals, *mise-en-scene*, characters, biographical and sociocultural status of the filmmaker. Distribution, exhibition and production mode (artisanal) in the context of ideological constructs (for example opposing authoritarian society individually, not in the name of a class or a third party) are considerably influenced by 'accented style.'

Women's video productions of Iranian origin possess some of the features Naficy describes as accented style, although they belong to diverse media and technique to which narrative is related and constructed. The notion of 'accented style' provides a clearer lens for understanding such intercultural productions and their association to the artists' memory and identity. However, the international language of the video medium in creating meaning, transcends any cross-cultural limits and enables practitioners to transmit and voice their message. By exploring some of the screen productions made by Iranian women, this study will further develop Naficy's argument by analyzing video practices on the dominant themes in contemporary Iranian society and concepts. Additionally, this paper explores the role of ideology, identity and religion in leading to dilemma, duality and fragmentation.

### 3. Screen as duality and division

According to Connolly (2009) at times artists' personal associations with specific sites or contexts becomes the substance of the work, which could determine the logic of its production. Shirin Neshat's video works reflect her biography and her critique of cultural and societal status like gender divisions in Iranian and Islamic culture, but as suggested by Verzotti (2002) she goes beyond this theme and emphasizes cultural dissimilarity between the Middle-East and the West. In her black and white photographic series; *Women of Allah* (1993-1997) she photographed herself wearing a veil (chador) in different postures gazing at the camera. In 1997 she converted her medium to video so that she could explore new geographical and philosophical domains through moving images. Video enabled her to explore cultural distances between moral and modern concept of lifestyle in different continents (Goldberg, 2002: 67).

The arrangement style of two adjacent screens is a predominant feature of Neshat's installation works. *Turbulent* (1998) is a dual video installation projected concurrently on two adjacent walls. Opposites are represented in various modes: colour theme (black and white), sexuality (male and female), frame composition (empty and crowded seats in auditorium), camera movement (fixed view and rotating view), and music and sound (silence and singing or a rhythmic music and ambiguous chanting). The video is presented in a paradoxical arrangement of audio-visual and cinematic elements to convey the binary concept. In an interview with Matt (2000) Neshat argues that the use of narrative in her videos posed 'a great challenge for [her] to create a type of narrative that is not tied to language, but rather functions purely on a visual and sonic level,' (Matt, 2000: 25). Opposites are represented in various modes as; colour theme (black and white), sexuality (male and female), frame composition (empty and crowded seats in auditorium), camera movement (fixed view and rotating view), music and sound (silence and singing or a rhythmic music and ambiguous chanting).



1 Women of Allah, photograph collection by Shirin Neshat (Source: <http://www.artnet.com/artists/shirin-neshat/3?type=photographs>)



2: Shirin Neshat, *Turbulent*, 1998, (source: <http://www.filmmakermagazine.com/archives/issues/fall2001/reports/turbulent.php#.Wl0QoaiRo2w>)

3: Screen Shots from *Rapture* (1999), Shirin Neshat, (Source: <http://www.bohen.org/project/shirin-neshat>)Wl0QoaiRo2w)

*Rapture*, another of Shirin Neshat's video installations was made in 1999. The opening sequence of both screens is an establishing shot of two empty locations; an ancient castle and a panorama of a vast desert. Presentation format is in the form of dual projections on two facing walls of a gallery space. Likewise, the unfoldment of the narrative requires the viewer to follow the story in opposition rather than in continuum.

On one side the screen encompasses masses of men approaching the camera from, and passing through the arched gate of a castle while clapping. All are wearing identical white shirts and black trousers. The other screen shows a group of women in black veil together on an open desert. Significantly, here several visual elements like the seashore and boat, denote women's border crossing. As Naficy (2000) suggests, these shots portray women's freedom from male force and restrained conventions, compared with male confinement within tradition and patriarchal barriers.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In the Middle East and specifically Islamic governments of the region, women have no right to protest, but according to Islamic canon, must surrender to whatever is assigned to them as an obligation. It could be argued that the form Neshat utilizes in portraying injustice and paradox in contemporary Iran is a powerful protest art responding to and reflecting the conflict. By developing the use of divided space, she has become able to create for viewers, a level of evolutionary immersion. Cultural identity is informed by shared lived-experiences and memories, but also constantly evolves through its reinterpretation and representation. It is an imagined notion that is grounded in the Body.

Neshat (2001) deals with various layers of identity in different locations, and in doing so, she ends up establishing ground breaking connections with those spaces according to the necessities of new layers of identity. The relations between body, architecture, and ideology construct an expressive ambience in her video practices. This is an eternal, endless construction that always modifies itself in order to articulate diverse characteristics, on that account constructing identity, as defined by Hall (1994). Such dynamic construction is a quality of identity that allows the depiction of a character who is in the borderlands, situation of being in-between and fragmented. Geographical and psychological location is shaped throughout the interaction between the different layers of identity. Those layers are constantly trying to unite; however, they can be opposite and contradictory while still trying to occupy the same space. These representations have been successful in the field of video installation as the diverse sensory components to the video installations allow the viewer to be exposed to multiple concepts and perspectives simultaneously. Meanwhile the ability to provoke an embodied and affective reaction within the viewer extends the chance of their immediate emotional connection and subsequent intellectual enquiry.

Consequently, artists can take advantage of the impressive and democratic dimensions of video installation; involving sight, sounds, space and time, to engage the viewer with their sensory interactions; while the reverberations of the space allow an understanding to emerge over time, and engage the viewer. In this way, creating connections between conceptual and audio-visual aspects by engaging viewers through active spaces with a questioning of cultural identity and memory, is successfully achieved by creating a lived experience for the viewer. However, the function of these sensory elements is not merely to wash over the passive viewer, but rather to compel them to negotiate and navigate through the screen installations, giving them agency.

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